

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 2 March, 2003

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

I've heard it said that the most powerful weapon in the world is laughter.

It can accomplish things that nothing else can.

It can bring down your blood pressure.

It can release the damaging pressures that hide in your hearts.

It can prick the puffed-up balloons who think that they're better than any other living being.

And so, that's why I pray this prayer (and you should, too):

Lord of laughter!

Shake me away

and teach me to laugh at myself,

at my black-draped solemnity,

at my petty preoccupation with success-and-failure,

at my hurts and adversities,

at my many fears and terrors.

Let my laughter lure me deep

underneath the terrors without names,

underneath the questions without answers,

underneath the pain that has no relief...

Until I find within myself

the love I haven't used,

the strength I haven't spent,

the courage I haven't tapped,

the dream I haven't risked,

the beauty I haven't expressed.

Let me become the person You want me to be,

as fully as I can,

as unflinchingly as I can,

as accurately as I can.

Let me find You in myself

so that I can find myself in You.

So, as we get closer and closer to Spring Break...and you begin to notice that you're exhausted, sick-and-tired, downtrodden, miserable and absolutely positive that it wouldn't take very much to drive you over the edge...

Think about “laughing in the Lord”.
It just might help.

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

ASH WEDNESDAY

Wednesday, 5 March, is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent 2003. Here’s the schedule of services:

0615 – Mass and ashes – WH5300

1205 – Mass and ashes – Chapel

1700 – Ceremony of Ashes only – Chapel

1900 – Mass and ashes – Chapel

LENTEN FAST AND ABSTINENCE

As a sign of seriousness, Catholics are asked to FAST during Lent and to ABSTAIN from meat at certain times.

FASTING means “one full meal and two small ones” on a given day.

ABSTINENCE means “no meat or poultry”.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of both FASTING and ABSTINENCE.

Every Friday in Lent is a day of ABSTINENCE in memory of the Lord’s passion and death.

GUEST SPEAKER

UCF (United Catholic Fellowship) will host a guest speaker at their meeting on Tuesday, 4 March, in the Chaplain’s Office. Dr. Al Rossi, formerly of Pace University and a practicing psychologist, will speak on “Psychology and Religion”. Everyone is invited.

CATHOLIC CADET PRAYER BREAKFAST

The Spring Catholic Cadet Prayer Breakfast will be held on Wednesday, 12 March, at The West Point Club at 0615. More details will be sent.

LENT:

Well, here it is again...just when you thought you were safe.

The annual forty-day period when the Church asks us to GET SERIOUS.

The ASHES on Ash Wednesday are supposed to be a BEGINNING.

Why FORTY DAYS?

Because important events in the Bible are usually described as lasting for “forty days”: Noah in the ark (Genesis 6-9); Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18); the tribes of Israel in the desert for forty years (Deuteronomy 2:7); Jesus’ time of trial in the desert (Matthew 4).

“Forty” denotes a “lengthy period of time”.

Why ASHES?

Because in ancient times, ASHES always signified “personal sorrow and repentance”. Before the days of Personal Confession in the Catholic Church, a sinner’s penance was public, and he or she might have to stand at the door of the Church for FORTY days, dressed in rough clothing and sprinkled with ASHES. Then at Easter, he or she would be received back into communion with the Church.

For us, ASHES can signify that we’re serious about entering into this time of personal preparation for the Great Holydays of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

What about FASTING?

Well, in the Early Church, they relied heavily on FASTING as an expression of their religious seriousness. As a matter of fact, from AD 400 to 800 or so, only one meal each day – usually in the evening – was permitted, and this meal couldn’t include flesh-meat, fish, alcohol or even eggs or milk products. Sundays didn’t count, of course; they were always celebrated as “Little Easters”.

What about ALMSGIVING?

It means “giving money to the poor”, and the early Christians used to take the money they saved on groceries and give it to the poor.

Modern Lenten practices certainly encourage this type of “negative penance” (giving up things), but it also encourages “positive penance” (doing extra good deeds and increasing one’s spiritual practices).

Best advice I ever heard on the matter came from a Seminary professor I used to know. He said: “In Lent, it’s not necessary to invent penances for yourself. The best thing is simply to do your ordinary tasks in an extraordinary way”.

DID YOU KNOW?

AFRICAN SAINTS:

With the celebration of Martin Luther King Day in January every year, we begin to think a lot about “Black History” during Black History Month.

So as the month comes to a close, it makes sense to take a look at the witness and inspiration of Catholic saints who were from Africa. Some were black; some were Berber; all were African.

There are quite a few:

St. Victor I – He was pope from AD 189 to 199 and was African.

He decreed that Easter be celebrated on Sunday each year (rather than on the day of Passover, which changes from year to year).

He was the first pope to initiate contact with the Roman imperial

household, convincing the Emperor Commodus not to persecute Christians (through the influence of Marcia, the Emperor's concubine, who was a Christian). He died as a martyr under the Emperor Septimius Severus in 199.

St. Miltiades – Another African pope, Miltiades served from AD 311 to 314, right after Constantine made Christianity legal. Writing later, St. Augustine described Miltiades as “a man of moderation and peace”.

St. Gelasius I – Another African pope, Gelasius was one of the first to try and codify the books of the Bible. He was popular in Rome because of his personal sanctity and his concern for the poor. He served the Church from AD 492 to 496.

St. Moses the Ethiopian – Moses was an Abyssinian slave born around AD 330. After he was released because of his temper, he became the leader of a gang of thieves. Later in his life, he sought refuge among the monks of the African deserts, where he renounced violence and was converted to Christianity; he later was ordained to the priesthood. He died as a martyr around AD 405 when a band of nomads raided his monastery, and he refused to fight.

St. Augustine – Augustine lived from AD 354 to 430 and has been considered the most influential theologian in the Church's history. He lived a sinful life in his early years and in AD 387 underwent a powerful conversion. The restlessness of the human heart was the basis of his thought, and he wrote the famous words:

You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.

He was bishop of Hippo in North Africa and wrote hundreds of books, letters, sermons and tracts.

St. Monica – Monica was the mother of Augustine and was married to a North African official who had a violent temper. By her constant prayers, she was instrumental in converting him and her mother-in-law...and her famous son. She spent so much energy in trying to convert Augustine that one person observed:

It's not possible that the son of so many tears
should perish.

Monica died in AD 387. Both Augustine and Monica were Berber Africans.

St. Martin de Porres – Martin lived in Lima, Peru, from AD 1579 to 1639. He was the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and a free black woman, and even as a child was known for giving his possessions away to the poor. He apprenticed himself to a doctor and learned enough to be able to care for the sick of Lima, regardless of race. Then he entered the Dominican monastery in Lima, where

he lived so humbly and generously that the superiors ended their racist practice of not allowing blacks to be full members of the community. He spent his nights in prayer and his days in nursing the sick and caring for the poor. He always referred to himself as “a poor slave” and “a mulatto dog”...but his contemporaries called him “father of charity, father of the poor”.

St. Josephine Bakhita – Josephine was born in the Sudan in 1869. At the age of 9, she was kidnapped by Arabs and sold into slavery. A series of slave-owners humiliated, tortured and mutilated her before she was taken to Italy as nursemaid for her mistress’ child. There she learned about the Catholic faith and was eventually freed. She later joined the Canossian Sisters in Vincenza, where she served the poor and weak. Josephine died in 1947 at the age of 78, and Pope John Paul canonized her in 2000.

Venerable Pierre Toussaint – Not yet considered a “saint” but “venerable”, Pierre could eventually become the USA’s first canonized black saint. Born in Haiti in 1766, he worked for a well-educated Catholic family. He came to New York with them when they fled an anti-slavery uprising, and he worked as a domestic, learning to read and write. After his owner died, the widow lost her money, and Pierre went to work as a hair-dresser to support her. Before her own death in 1807, she freed him. Until his death in 1853, he worked constantly with orphans, the poor and the sick of New York.

St. Charles Lwanga and his Companions – Charles and his companions were among many Ugandans who converted to the Catholic Faith in the 1880s. They lived and worked in the court of King Mwanga, who was a violent ruler and a pedophile. The older Christians attempted to guard the young pages from Mwanga’s advances, and as a result, the king became angered at the Christians. He separated the 22 Catholics and 80 Anglicans from the others and subjected them to various forms of deprivation. Charles and his companions were finally burned to death, and as several died, they called out:

You can burn our bodies,
but you cannot harm our souls.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

...the Firsties, as they celebrate 100th Night...and all who will travel to celebrate with them.

...all the underclass cadets on the Catholic Retreat this weekend.

...all our military brothers and sisters – and their families – throughout the world.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I have a question about Joseph and Mary. We believe that Mary was “ever a virgin”, and on the cross, Jesus gave Mary to the Apostle John to care for. Tradition also has Mary traveling with John and eventually settling in Ephesus (in modern Turkey). I’m wondering what happened to Joseph; little is said about him. Also, did Joseph and Mary have a “platonic relationship”? If so, why? If not, did Jesus have any brothers and sisters?

A: Actually, you’ve asked several questions.

The belief that Mary lived in Ephesus with the Apostle John is more legendary than anything else, and there’s no way to prove its correctness. The last we actually hear of Mary in the New Testament is in the book of The Acts of the Apostles, where she is present with the apostles on the Day of Pentecost.

Joseph disappears from Scripture early in the Gospels, and no substantial mention is made of him after the first couple of chapters in both Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels. So no one knows any more than that.

Some pretty colorful and sometimes whimsical stories have survived from the early Christian centuries. For example, there’s the one about Mary recognizing Joseph as a fit husband by means of his walking staff, which sprouted a lily – the symbol of sexual purity – when she passed by him. These stories are only legends. Truth is, we know very little about Joseph.

As for the marriage of Mary and Joseph, Catholic tradition has believed from earliest times that Mary was a virgin “before, during and after” the birth of Jesus. The traditions of both Eastern and Western Churches have preserved this belief very strongly, and it remains a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church.

Once you get beyond the bald statement, however, you enter a world of questions: Did Mary and Joseph have a “platonic” marriage? Did Mary’s remaining a virgin “before, during and after” mean that she experienced no pain in the birth of Jesus? When the Gospel stories mention the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus (Mark 6:3), did they mean actual siblings, or did they mean “cousins” or “close relatives” (Catholic tradition has always believed that they meant “cousins” or “close relatives”)?

In 1960, the Church issued a letter to superiors of religious institutes warning that some of the discussion about these topics ran the risk of getting too biological and being carried on in bad taste without ever really taking note of the theological intention of the belief.

Seeing Mary as a virgin has no real meaning unless it’s related to the unique nature of Jesus and the redemptive act of God. Her virginity is not intended to derogate the sexual act in marriage; instead, it serves as a spotlight on the singular figure of Jesus as Redeemer and on Mary as a unique instrument in the process.

In other words, the Catholic tradition has always seen Mary’s virginity as essentially Christological, testifying that Jesus’ origin is in God and that what is special about him cannot be explained by human parentage alone but is due to God’s creative initiative.

Catholic dedication to praying WITH Mary (we don’t pray TO Mary) is really a comment not so much on Mary but on Jesus and God’s redemptive plan.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

GRACE:

The whole concept of GRACE plays such a central role in the history of Christian religious thought that it's a good idea to examine how different traditions interpret the idea.

And it's also been the source of a lot of division over the centuries.

So let's look at the phenomenon briefly.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for GRACE is "charis" (the "ch" is pronounced like a "k"), and it basically means "God's graciousness toward men and women". This "graciousness" is not a "thing", nor is it the same as "human life".

It's separate from and much more than "human life".

Essentially, GRACE is "God's gift of Self"...it's free and undeserved.

And this gift has two effects" FORGIVENESS and TRANSFORMATION.

While understanding the forgiveness that GRACE brings, the early Catholic tradition emphasized the "transforming" nature of GRACE. They actually called it "deification", which means "the process whereby humans become divine". They had a saying: "God became man so that man could become God".

They didn't really believe that humans actually "became" God. What they were attempting to emphasize is that when God shares his very life with a human, that "life of God" essentially transforms and heals human nature, lifting it up and uniting it with God in a profound way.

The Protestant tradition of Christianity has tended to emphasize the idea of FORGIVENESS (they use the term "justification"): the process of sinners being justified by accepting the "life of God".

But either way you look at it, GRACE still means "sharing God's life", and it's a free gift of God which can have an amazing effect in the life of a human being.

On our own, we humans can never essentially transform ourselves; we need the "deifying" reality of God's life, the free forgiveness of God. Only with God's unhindered presence can any real and authentic progress be made in being lifted up and forgiven.

We can't do it ourselves.

Our vocation is to be "godly", and GRACE is the way it comes about.

Remember the hymn:

Amazing GRACE, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"Whenever a person is without a friend,
not a single thing in the world appears friendly."

St. Augustine
Letter 130:2

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!

Firsties, have a great weekend...and stay safe.

Everybody else, have a great weekend, too...

And as St. Paul said: "Pray always..."

Woodie